



[Avanti Popolo](#), alla riscossa
Onward, people, to the revolution

Songs

Political songs in South Africa are a main part of the Agitprop of the country. Mass political singing is a South African characteristic.

At political rallies and conferences, and whenever the masses are gathered in one place, new songs and old songs can be heard.

It would be unusual in South Africa if a speaker on a platform was to call for a song, and the audience be unable to respond.

Often, a crowd will assert itself with songs that the platform

may, or may not, welcome. The songs can provide a current of discourse that runs beside, and affects, the formal, verbal process of the gathering.

Both melodies and lyrics are composed and re-composed to express current meanings of the moment. Comrades quickly compose and rehearse in groups. Together with dance, this is a mass art form that can spread and take off with speed. With or without the benefit of electronic media, it is a very powerful unifier of the South African masses, and of their liberation movement.

All of the above can be written without fear of contradiction. But what becomes apparent, when doing so, is that there is hardly any literature or recorded audio material that bears witness to this giant phenomenon that touches millions and which proceeds from year to year and decade to decade.

There is the story of the martyr [Vuyisile Mini](#), who was known as a composer of songs. There is Enoch Sontonga, the composer of “[Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika](#)”, which is the national anthem of South Africa and at least three other countries, although in South Africa it has been diluted with parts of “[Die Stem](#)”. These are known about, but the modern and regenerative life of political songs in the country is not as a rule written about in the mass media, or studied in the academy.

Efforts to promote “[The Internationale](#)”, the US trade union anthem “Solidarity Forever”, and others of that kind are not

very successful here, mainly because these works come out of a tradition that is far less of a mass phenomenon than what we have here in South Africa. With the possible exception of the “Internationale”, because of its ancient associations with the Paris Commune of 1871 (the first-ever workers’ state) and its consequent worldwide acceptance as the anthem of the communists, most of these songs lack resonance in South Africa, where the living culture of political song is far in advance of other places.

Is it necessary to discuss something like this? Yes, it is necessary. All of our study is to objectify our political world and to understand it in a rational and explicit way. It is not acceptable to remain with a situation where some things are reflected in academic and journalistic discourse, while other aspects of our political lives are allowed to pass away without commentary or permanent record of any kind.

In the absence of a readily-available discursive literature, the above will have to suffice for the stimulation of a discussion about political singing. We should bear in mind that this study of ours is breaking new ground in terms of commentary upon mass political song.

We would also want to appeal to anyone who has knowledge of any recordings of, or scholarly works about, political singing in South Africa, to let the CU know about them. It may be that there is a body of scholarship and critical commentary that we just have not discovered yet.

Choirs

Formal Choirs are characteristic of South Africa, although South Africans seem hardly to be aware of their comparative high position in the world in this wonderful art form. It is true that there are choral traditions in many countries but in South Africa, choirs are everywhere. Naturally, they sing religious songs for the most part, but not always, and there has always been revolutionary choral singing.

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